

*To Andrew Duncan Jr. M.D.  
See ———  
with the compliments of  
The Author*

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

STATE OF THE PEASANTRY

OF THE

West of Ireland,

DURING THE EPIDEMIC FEVER, &c.

IN THE MONTHS OF JULY, AUGUST, AND SEPTEMBER, 1822,

DEDICATED TO

HIS EXCELLENCY THE LORD LIEUTENANT.

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BY

DE BURGH BIRCH, M. D.

Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

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DUBLIN:

RICHARD MILLIKEN, GRAFTON-STREET,

BOOKSELLER TO HIS MAJESTY,

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUKE OF CLARENCE,

HIS EXCELLENCY THE MOST NOBLE THE MARQUESS  
WELLESLEY,

AND THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN.

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1823.

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TO HIS EXCELLENCY RICHARD MARQUESS WELLESLEY,  
LORD LIEUTENANT GENERAL, AND GENERAL  
GOVERNOR OF IRELAND, &c. &c. &c.

MY LORD,

As it was by your Excellency's order I had an opportunity to make the annexed observations, so I dedicate them to your Excellency with respect as well as gratitude. To the energy and judgment displayed by your Lordship on the trying occasion alluded to, may be ascribed the success of the plans pursued to avert the evils with which we were surrounded. That similar success may invariably attend your efforts to relieve the unprotected and distressed, is the fervent hope of

Your Excellency's

Most devoted Servant,

DE BURGH BIRCH, M.D.



## OBSERVATIONS, &c.

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In the month of July, 1822, representations having been made to the Dublin Committee for the Relief of the Poor, that the peasantry of the half-barony of Erris, County Mayo, were afflicted with a severe dysentery and fever; and a communication to this effect having been made to the Commissioners of Relief appointed by his Excellency the Lord Lieutenant, they directed that a physician should be sent to Erris. Accordingly, I had the honour to receive this appointment. On the 8th of July I left Dublin, and on the 9th arrived at Castlebar, when I had a conference with the Central Committee, and the Deputation sent by them to visit Erris. After this I proceeded to my destination, which I reached on the 12th.

My first inquiries were, as to the nature of the disease, and the number who had fallen victims to it. Dysentery, fever, and cholera morbus were the prevalent diseases; of these the first was the most common, the last was comparatively trifling. The Dysentery arose from the use of bad food, or from the want of any thing which possessed the smallest

nutriment. What many had to subsist on were weeds and shell-fish; and in a few instances new potatoes scarcely six weeks growth. Their time was occupied in gathering them as long as their strength permitted it, which was very limited indeed. The applications for medical aid were more from the immediate vicinity of Binghamstown, than I could attend to for two or three days, although the invalids in the village were not numerous.—The dysentery commenced with debility, pain in the umbilical region, and frequent dejections of mucus matter; as the disease proceeded, the dejections became more frequent, and mixed with blood, accompanied by tormina, great prostration of strength, and tumefaction of the lower extremities, with a rapid and weak pulse. By this tumefaction, the skin was distended to a most painful degree; it was œdematous, and seemed to arise from debility, the consequence of injurious diet. Those who were thus attacked, and had not the advantage of provisions and medical aid, to them it generally proved fatal. The remedies which mostly succeeded in mitigating the symptoms, and arresting the progress of the disease, were an improved diet, consisting of oatmeal and rice-pudding, and rice-milk, accompanied by the following medicines:—*R olei ricini uncias duas, Aquæ menthæ unciam M. fiat haustus. R pulveris Rhei grana octo, submuriatis Hydrargyri grana quinque.* These were given alternate days, with the best effects. Those afflicted with fever required more



attention, for most of them being destitute of the necessities of life, and requiring the constant attendance of others, were in a truly pitiable condition. The medical treatment was (of necessity) simple, as a multiplicity of medicines, and the consequent directions, could not with propriety be confided to ignorant peasants, who received their instructions through an interpreter. The fever was of the Typhoid type. Its attack was sudden; the patient complained of violent pain in the head, eyes, and limbs, but particularly about the scrobiculus cordis. As the disease advanced, the patient's tongue and lips became dry and parched, the eyes wild and watchful, delirium sometimes supervened, and always occurred in fatal cases. These were the only symptoms of local affection which I observed. At the commencement of the attack, the patient was usually relieved by purgatives and diluents, such as powders of jalap and calomel, or pills of extract of colocynth and calomel, with doses of neutral salts afterwards, and barley-water for drink.

These were followed up by nauseating doses of tartar-emetic, which determined to the skin, and relieved the pain of the head. Sometimes, notwithstanding this treatment, the pain of the head continued; then recourse was had, with the happiest results, to cold applications, which were made by dipping cloths (repeatedly folded) in cold spring water, and in them enveloping the head, which had been previously close-clipped, shaving being out of the question, as no barber would do it, and no other could.

Where these remedies failed in giving the looked-for relief, other topical applications afforded no resource. Blisters were generally inadmissible, as their heads could not be shaved; and I remarked that there was a serious inconvenience from a raw surface, which, considering the restless state of the patient, more than counterbalanced any good they produced. Leeches, from their difficulty of application, and their novelty to those people, completely prevented any attempts to use them. General bleeding I seldom tried, and where I did, its effects were not very striking. I was not prevented from adopting it by any preconceived opinion of its inutility, as I had been strongly impressed with a different idea; but I could not give time to it, having great distances to travel each day; not less than fifteen to twenty, and sometimes thirty miles. Notwithstanding the great numbers affected by those diseases, few sunk under them—that is, after their distress was made known to Government. The abundant supplies sent by the Commissioners of Relief, and our generous English friends, succeeded in preventing the increase of disease, and in diminishing that which already existed. The sick had a sufficiency, and those in health had a fair allowance given them for their labour, employment, more than the execution of any particular work, being the object of the various Committees.

The greatest mortality was, before supplies were sent—in three months one hundred and forty persons died. This great number consisted chiefly of



very old or very young persons ; the former having suffered from fever and dysentery, the latter principally from SMALL POX ; in both the want of nutriment and medicine, especially nutriment, heightened their danger, or rather accelerated their fate. The manner in which that pest, the small pox, is disseminated, is not unworthy of notice. Itinerant inoculators are paid by those who can afford a shilling, in the different villages through which they pass, for inoculating their children, and from them the others take it naturally ; hence arises an extensive mortality, that has nothing to check its progress.

Having considered the consequences of this famine, it is but right also to pay some attention to its cause. This was undoubtedly the failure of the potato crop—the potatoes were few and small.—When they were put up in heaps, as usual, in the fields, and covered with clay, they rotted from the wetness of the winter season. Thus the principal, I may say, sole support of the peasantry was destroyed. In Erris potatoes constitute the staple article of food, as no grain to any amount is raised but barley. A part, and but a small part of this is made into meal, the remainder into whiskey. The facilities for doing so are too great, and the inducements too strong, for persons in their circumstances to resist. This half-barony (of twelve hundred square miles), excluded from the rest of the kingdom by a want of roads, or (until very lately) roads so bad, that travelling on them was difficult and dangerous,

does not afford a market for the disposal of grain; and to attempt to bring it out of the barony, would be a labour not to be recompensed by whole produce of the commodity. To avoid this trouble, and to procure such a price as will enable them to pay their landlords, and leave a good profit to themselves, they convert it into whiskey. This is securely done in their bogs, for which a still is procured for half a guinea. One Cwt. of barley is not worth more in that quarter than five shillings, which, if distilled, will make three gallons of good whiskey, at five shillings per gallon, consequently making the Cwt. of barley produce fifteen shillings instead of five. A man can readily carry six gallons of whiskey on his back, and this he can do at times most safe for the disposal of it, whereas, a sack of barley containing two Cwt. will require a horse to carry it, and a man to attend him during a long day in bringing it to market. Thus by the first method he will get thirty shillings for two Cwt. of barley without the expense of a horse, but by the second, he can only get ten shillings, with the expense of a horse. This is one of the ways pursued by the peasantry of Erris to obtain a livelihood. There is another of a similar nature, namely, smuggling; which is carried on to a great extent in tobacco, brandy and hollands; the principal is tobacco, for it is to the poor what tea is to the rich, an indispensable article. The manner in which this contraband traffic is

carried on, is truly surprising. The individuals concerned in it, are of three classes, viz. the seller or owner of the ship, the agent, who acts for him throughout the country, and the humble purchaser, who runs the greatest risk. Their plan of proceeding is thus ; a poor man allured by the chance of great gain goes to the agent, and purchases from him a ticket, for one or more bales of tobacco, at a certain rate ; in this ticket or draft upon the seller, no mention of tobacco is made, but an order is given for a certain sum of money, in lieu of which he receives tobacco at the stipulated rate. The purchaser as soon as he gets the tobacco into his possession, takes all the risk upon himself. The agent thus risks nothing, while the unfortunate peasant generally stakes his whole property, and so lucrative is this agency, that persons of this class frequently acquire large sums of money in that way. For each bale that is brought to the interior of the country, a premium of six guineas or more is given, to gain which, they traverse bogs and mountains, and all bye-ways, undergoing fatigue of body, and anxiety of mind, with the greatest fortitude, plainly refuting the charge of laziness, where an object worthy of their exertion is held forth to them. In this manner tobacco and other foreign goods were smuggled, to a great amount while I was in Erris, the duty upon which, should have produced upwards of fifteen thousand pounds sterling. The allurements to engage in this



traffic are so great, that many have been known to sell all their property to commence a species of gambling, which generally ends in their ruin ; it, and illicit distillation, naturally make those engaged in them, anxious and idle, destroying both their health and morals. So that it is commonly remarked that they are the most disorderly characters in their respective neighbourhoods. A third way by which a livelihood is obtained is fishing, this, literally speaking, does not constitute a means of support of itself, for the fishermen are unable to go to sea in rough weather, or, indeed, in fine weather, sufficiently far from shore, to get at the best fishing, for want of good boats and tackle. This is a circumstance much to be regretted, for there is more than sufficient to make them comfortable, if they could avail themselves of it. The coast of Erris abounds with fish, so much so, that strangers go there from great distances, viz. Dublin, Skerries, &c. for the purpose of fishing, and find great advantage in so doing. It is a fact that a fleet of twenty well found fishing boats, came from Skerries in the month of May, remained six weeks, and took away upwards of eleven thousand pounds worth of cured fish, consisting of ling, cod, &c. An abundance of flat fish also were taken with them, and various others, fit only to make oil of, of these no use was made, as there were no means for doing so. These men from Skerries went out every Monday morning, and returned

on Saturday night, never allowing their avocations to break in upon the Sabbath, and their whole conduct coincided with this, as they were remarkable for their honesty and sobriety. One exception to the strict observance of Sunday, I cannot avoid mentioning, which was, that they cut off the heads of the fish they had taken during the week, and gave them to the famishing peasants, who greedily, and thankfully took them. This clearly shows, that they had not the means to avail themselves of a resource which would have mitigated, if not totally prevented the great calamities with which they were afflicted. Of this we have still further proof in the boats themselves, which are, at best, made of bad timber, and plied by oars, or not even of timber, but of a horse's hide stretched over a frame of slender laths, this is called a currough. As to fishing tackle, they are still worse off, their lines single cords, with few hooks, and these made of iron not harder than the nails of a horse-shoe. No speculation would appear more promising than a large fishery in that part of the kingdom; for supposing, that a vessel, when complete, with sails and fishing tackle, to cost 300*l*. it is evident, by the success of the Skerries fishermen, that the capital expended would be immediately reimbursed.

There is on the same coast a peculiar, and very valuable fishery, viz. the sun-fish, which abounds



in oil, and is proportionably as productive as the whale, so much to be desired now when it might be used to make gas. In short, any attempt to improve the condition of these poor people, has this encouragement, that it can hardly fail of success, for I cannot picture to myself any human beings in a more pitiable state. That this is the case will scarcely be denied, if we consider the miserable places in which they reside. Those hovels are constructed of the materials with which they are surrounded; if in stony ground, they are made of stone, if in a bog, they are generally built of large sods, or, as I have sometimes seen, are excavated in the bog on the side of a hill, with a trench about them to carry off the streams. This is bad enough, but I have met with others worse: one was in a bog, two high ditches formed side walls, the ends were made of sods, and a few sticks were thrown over these, and upon them some potato-tops and heath for thatch, in which a hole was left that served for a door, a window, and a chimney; it should have escaped my notice, but that the occupier happened to be sick, who crawled up out of it, presenting a figure, in every respect corresponding with his dwelling. Another habitation, in which a woman with five children lived, was but six feet long, five wide, and little more than five feet high; the entrance was not more than three feet high, of a wedge shape, i. e. two feet wide at top, and one at bottom; notwithstanding the smoke, I squeezed through this

crevice, and saw the poor woman with her children, the youngest, her only son, sitting round a few burning sods of turf, without any thing to support them but what their charitable neighbours could give them, and that was not much, as may be well imagined, when they themselves were in great distress. On entering any of their cabins, whatever be their property, filth presents itself to the view upon all sides. In some there are bedsteads, but in most the beds are on the ground, close by the fire ; a chair is a rarity, three-legged stools, where there are seats, supplying their place. The walls are black and sooty, from smoke, which they could not do without, in winter particularly, for it supplies the place of clothing, and prevents the bad effects of damp walls and floors, such as rheumatism, &c. Thus it appears upon the whole, that they are a most miserable set of people, and the great cause of this seems to me to be, a want of useful employment. This is the conclusion I come to from personal observation of, and conversation with them ; generally finding groups of men idle in the different villages which I visited, and none of those whom I questioned were able to account for the disposal of a tenth part of their time in Winter, and not more than the half of summer. In addition to the want of markets and good roads, as discouraging labour, they have a system of managing their land, which is, if possible, more so. The land is not taken by the acre, or separate farm, but in

*sums*, that is, the inhabitants of a village take the land adjoining them at a certain total price, and then divide it among themselves, each paying in proportion to his allotment; this he retains in his possession during two years, and then a new division takes place, thus preventing them to use exertions to improve their different portions, as they know that the fruits of their labour will be reaped by another. During the late distress, many were unwilling to give any labour in return for the provisions they received, imagining, that it was sent to be distributed gratuitously; this opinion was stoutly supported by those among them, who undoubtedly were not objects of charity, such as those who had cows and horses, and had been selling provisions at exorbitant prices to their poor neighbours. They also complained of making roads, saying, that they were working harm for themselves, as these improvements would increase the value, and consequently the rent of their lands. To them may be ascribed the malicious reports of mismanagement in the County of Mayo, which reports were strengthened by the supporters of opposing interests and parties in that County. It is hardly necessary to mention this, as it has been shown, that the most unfounded statements were often supported with an ingenuity that would become a better cause. Most persons were anxious to show their gratitude, by strictly obeying the orders of their benefactors, and by so doing often exposed themselves to odious comparisons with



those, who, for popularity, distributed provisions gratuitously. The poor were grateful, extremely grateful, and the weight of the obligation was strongly impressed upon their minds by their zealous pastors, who, like themselves, suffered severely from the dearth; and to them great praise is due, for their unwearied exertions, in putting the designs of Government, and our munificent English friends, into effect; to them I owe a great deal, inasmuch as they cheerfully filled the offices of guides, hosts, and interpreters. Here it is but right to say, that they dearly earn their pittances, having to travel through a wild pathless country, at all hours, and seasons, at the most imminent risk of their lives, to minister those rites, which the peasant regards as indispensable to his welfare, and which he would consider as worse than murder to refuse. Even the ordinary duty of Sunday, in Winter, is a service of danger both to the priest and his congregation, for in many places they officiate in the open air, not having chapels, and in others they are not much better, from the dilapidated state of those buildings. Thus a great obstacle is presented to the dissemination of those christian and moral principles, upon which alone the stability of the good order of society depends, and to which obstacle the semi-barbarous, and hitherto lawless state of that part of the country is mainly attributable.

Erris, by its mountains on the one side, the sea on the other, and until lately, without a road into it, was shut out from the rest of the kingdom, afforded to the delinquent of every description a secure retreat, for he sought an asylum among a people, who, though poor, would look upon the refusal of admittance to a stranger as a crime of the first magnitude, and who regarded such persons as the victims of persecution, not of justice ; from these guests they could not receive any benefit, but unavoidably must have been injured. As there are few places of worship, it cannot be expected that there are many schools, in fact there are none, and, consequently, the people are in the most lamentable state of ignorance. Schools might be established, as I have reason to know that the Roman Catholic priests would encourage them, provided there was no attempt to make proselytes. To liberal minds this proposition is just and natural.

The inhabitants complain of the country, that it is poor and unproductive, so as merely to afford the bare necessities of life, and if we should judge of it by the appearance of themselves and their houses, this complaint is absolutely just ; but when we consider its maritime position, and the gifts bountifully bestowed upon it by nature, we will think otherwise. The soil is swampy, but the numerous eminences and declivities afford great facilities for draining, and the mossy weed which is abundantly washed in by every tide, is the very



best of covering to reclaim the land ; with this they grow potatoes, which every one knows, require the richest manure, and then the ground will produce barley, oats, or grass. Again, upon the coast the best fishing is to be had ; and, finally, if we consider the capacious, and magnificent bays of Broadhaven and Blacksod, into which (the latter,) that fine river, the Owenmore, flows, we observe facilities for commerce, which, if taken advantage of, would not only enrich this secluded half-barony of Erris, but the whole kingdom. This assertion will not be questioned by any one who is acquainted with its relation to the New World, for he knows, that to transatlantic voyagers, Blacksod-bay is the most inviting of all harbours, as it is exactly in their course, quite safe, and might be made perfectly convenient.



R. MILLIKEN,  
Printer in Ordinary to his  
Majesty.